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ABSTRACT

Annotations of ERIC literature on the learning environment are presented in this document. Materials were selected for inclusion from the ERIC catalogs Resources in Education (RIE) and Current Index to Journals in Education (CIJE). The 10 publications are as follows: "School Is for Teachers: Enhancing the School Environment," by Buck Adams and Gerald D. Bailey; "The Copernican Plan: Restructuring the American High School," by Joseph M. Carroll; "Creating Effective Learning Environments for Disadvantaged Learners: Implications for the Design of Educational Programs," by Shirley Beard Colvin; "The Ecology of School Improvement," by Elliot W. Eisner; "A Guide for Dropout Prevention: Creating an Integrated Learning Environment in Secondary Schools," by Todd F. Fennimore; "Student Motivation," by Linda Grace and Robert L. Buser; "Expecting Miracles: How to Develop a Learning Consciousness in High School Classrooms," by Geery S. Howe; "Instructional Practices for Middle Grade Students: Developing Self-Directed Learners," by Sara Lake; "Instructional Practices in the Middle Grades: National Variations and Effects," by James M. McPartland and Shi-Chang Wu; and "Cause-Related Impediments to Effective Study Practices," by John W. Thomas, Robert G. Curley, and Amy Strage. (LMI)

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The Best of ERIC presents annotations of ERIC literature on important topics in educational management.

The selections are intended to give educators easy access to the most significant and useful information available from ERIC. Because of space limitations, the items listed should be viewed as representative, rather than exhaustive, of literature meeting those criteria.

Materials were selected for inclusion from the ERIC catalogs *Resources in Education (RIE)* and *Current Index to Journals in Education (CIJE)*.

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The Learning Environment

1 **Adams, Buck, and Gerald D. Bailey.** "School Is for Teachers: Enhancing the School Environment." *NASSP Bulletin* 73, 513 (January 1989): 44-48. EJ 382 023.

In this brief article, Adams and Bailey assert that principals must take care of their teachers to take care of their students. Utilizing research on bureaucratic organizations, they point out the inherent conflict between schools' institutional requirements and instructors' personal needs. Indeed, they say, teachers commonly suffer from isolation, disillusionment, and lack of respect. Their subsequent low morale affects their classroom performance, which affects the education their students receive.

By building teachers' self-esteem, say the authors, principals will enhance classroom learning. Repeated praise is a keystone to enhancing self-esteem: "If teachers are bombarded enough with positive, sincere, and specific messages, those messages will eventually be accepted." Such messages may consist of encouraging notes, public recognition, or pats on the back.

Principals should model self-esteem by paying attention to the image they project and how they feel about themselves. Adams and Bailey also cite research that contrasts clan-like communities characterized by two-way trust with authoritarian hierarchies that stifle trust.

Teachers who are treated respectfully and sensitively are apt to be effective instructors. A school environment that is good for teachers is also good for students.

2 **Carroll, Joseph M.** "The Copernican Plan: Restructuring the American High School." *Phi Delta Kappan* 71, 5 (January 1990): 358-65. EJ 400 584.

The Copernican Plan hopes to do for high school instructional practices what Copernicus did for astronomy.

Carroll points out that high schools' instructional structure has changed little since early in the twentieth century. Days are divided into seven classes of roughly fifty minutes each, and credit is awarded largely according to time spent in classes. Instruction typically occurs through lectures, supplemented by question-answer sessions and homework. The average teacher has five classes a day, each with about twenty-five different students. Hence, individualized attention is impractical. Students learn perhaps seven subjects simultaneously and must file in and out of nine different locations in less than seven hours. "At no other time," Carroll asserts, "is anyone placed in such an impersonalized, unproductive, frenetic environment."

The Copernican Plan attempts to redress the fragmented nature of high school instruction by offering intensive instruction. Students take their courses sequentially rather than simultaneously. They enroll in only one or two major classes at a time, with the classes meeting for either two or four hours each morning.

The more intensive classes offer several advantages. Since instructors teach only one or two classes at a time rather than five, they can better prepare for a variety of activities, including complex ones that are not amenable to fifty-minute time slots. Even more importantly, according to Carroll, the longer classes reduce the number of students a teacher interacts with during a day and makes truly individualized instruction practical.

Carroll also proposes changes in how high schools award credit. Students under the Copernican Plan do not receive grades–they undermine collegiality, according to Carroll–and instead receive credit toward graduation upon demonstrating competence in their classes. Five diplomas are available under the plan: academic honors, academic, occupational honors, standard, and completion. The more prestigious diplomas, of course, require more credits.

The Copernican Plan encourages student independence, says Carroll. Afternoons are devoted to music, physical education, preparation or study periods, and most importantly, seminars. These seminars offer students an opportunity to integrate their knowledge while discussing particular interests or issues. A certain number of seminar credits are required for graduation and are awarded only for participation and leadership, not simply attendance. Indeed, Carroll argues that the Copernican Plan offers high school students the more adult environment that they require.

3 **Colvin, Shirley Beard.** "Creating Effective Learning Environments for Disadvantaged Learners: Implications for the Design of Educational Programs." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 8, 1988. 14 pages. ED 293 969.

This brief paper addresses minority students' low achievement in school and links it to other problems, particularly unemployment. Minority students' problems, according to Colvin, are best

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understood by considering their total environment, including the schools' and students' physical, social, cultural, and psychological climate. She studied, in their school, home, and neighborhood, two black male high school students with low basic skills before recommending how to improve their learning environments.

Colvin argues that such students require excellent teachers, a lot of individual attention, and an ample array of resources such as offsite workstudy positions. Their support network might include supervisors at such jobs as well as professionals from the social services. Increased contacts with parents, including home visits and parenting classes, would also enhance students' broader social environment.

Such changes cannot occur until school professionals are more aware of minority students' special needs. Colvin advocates further education, including inservice training. Staff members could act as advocates for particular students by interacting with them outside of class, keeping a weekly log on their progress, and meeting with other professionals to discuss the students' progress.

In sum, meeting minority students' special needs requires a major commitment from educators. Failure to meet this challenge, Colvin concludes, will mean that "society may continue to deteriorate."

4 **Eisner, Elliot W.** "The Ecology of School Improvement." *Educational Leadership* 45, 5 (February 1988): 24-29. EJ 368 822.

Eisner's recommendations for improving the school environment are based on extensive qualitative research. The study shadowed high school students and teachers in four California high schools for more than 1,600 hours.

The observations and interviews uncovered several problematic features of secondary schooling. Teachers complained of having little power outside the classroom and of being isolated from other adults. Students, too, seemed to suffer from educational fragmentation. They had difficulty relating subjects to each other, and the rewards for learning were more extrinsic than intrinsic. Students also made a sharp distinction between life-relevant and school-relevant learning. They seemed to feel that school was a boring task of little practical or immediate utility.

The author proposes several steps to defuse these problems. Allowing more discretion to students in selecting their subjects would "give students opportunities to pursue intellectual and artistic interests without penalty," even if those interests led away from the traditional curriculum. Building bridges between subjects rather than segregating them would equip students to "use what they learn to meet the demands of life." Closer relationships between pupils and staff would partially counter the social fragmentation in students' home and communities.

Eisner also recommends pedagogical changes. He would offer teachers more opportunities for improvement and evaluation. Student evaluation should be broader in concert with a more balanced curriculum sensitive to individual students' interests.

This linking of evaluation with curriculum reform supports Eisner's assertion that school reform cannot be adopted piecemeal: "If significant changes in our schools are to occur, our educational system needs to be viewed as a whole, as an ecosystem of mutual dependence."

5 **Fennimore, Todd F.** *A Guide for Dropout Prevention: Creating an Integrated Learning EnviTheronment in Secondary Schools.* Columbus, Ohio: National Center for Research in Vocational Education, 1988. 168 pages. ED 298 323.

As its title suggests, this book offers numerous and detailed recommendations for creating school environments that will keep students from dropping out.

Fennimore suggests that dropout prevention begins with forming a community task force of about a dozen people. This group should define the problem in its school and community, set goals to solve the problems, and establish objectives that will serve to meet those goals. These objectives will, of course, be more numerous and complex when the target population is heterogeneous. Teenage mothers will require different services than students with poor English-speaking skills, for example. The objectives should not exceed the school's resources, and they should be implemented slowly to avoid alienating teachers. The task force should work with enthusiastic instructors, and it should monitor and evaluate the program once it is implemented.

Most of the book is devoted to discussing particular strategies for reducing dropout rates. Enhancing student self-esteem is critical to many of them. Fennimore advocates schools that resemble collaborative work environments where students have considerable initiative. This entails less hierarchy, less subject-matter specialization, and more attention to students' individual desires. At-risk students in particular require supportive teachers and immediate rewards to avoid the frustration that leads to leaving school. Administrators should not punish them by placing them with younger students or by suspending them from school. Peer tutoring and counseling is a cost-effective alternative to such traditional and punitive measures.

An innovative curriculum can also aid students who are prone to drop out. Quest National Center of Columbus, Ohio, teaches skills for adolescents. The unit treats such topics as recognizing and accepting ones' emotions, resisting peer pressure, and linking classroom learning with personal development. The Sequoia Union School District of California has a program that is more job oriented and links two high schools with thirty-five high tech companies. Intensive training in English, math, and science is coupled with hands-on job experience supplemented by career planning and contacts. Nineteen of every twenty students who complete the course of study find work.

Fennimore proposes several structural changes. Flexible daily and annual schedules can make finishing school much more convenient for students with children. Longer class periods for at-risk students encourage more intense and varied learning. Several schools have significantly reduced truancy simply by monitoring attendance more carefully. School-based health clinics, though often controversial, have been very effective in cutting student pregnancy rates.

6 **Grace, Linda, and Robert L. Buser**. "Student Motivation." *The Practitioner* 14, 1 (September 1987): 1-12. ED 286 284.

Many factors affect students' desire to learn, say Grace and Buser. School-related variables include teachers' effectiveness, classroom attractiveness, and the degree to which students feel safe and important in the school environment.

Schools, then, have a lot of control over students' motivation, even students whose basic needs are not being met in the home. Grace and Buser stress that individual student differences must be considered, and that teachers cannot simply use one approach for everyone. Individualized, clearly identified goals that can be accomplished in incremental steps offer students opportunities to succeed often and on their own terms. Skillful teachers will also carefully help students overcome particular learning barriers, such as the fear of embarrassment, and will use a variety of rewards for achievement.

The authors provide descriptions of several programs that enhance student motivation. Boise High School in Idaho has a Positive Attitude Toward School and Self program to improve students' self-esteem and self-awareness. The classes are taught by teachers, counselors, administrators, school social workers, and psychologists in a variety of contexts. They instruct students on topics like goal-setting, problem-solving, and personal communication.

Decatur Public School in Illinois has a program to interest minority students in post-high school education that is funded by the state board of higher education and operated by Richland Community College. Participants are paid to attend class for twenty hours a month where they work on basic English, math, and reading skills and prepare to take a college entrance exam. Minority guest speakers regularly discuss how they used education to achieve success.

7 **Howe, Geery S**. "Expecting Miracles: How to Develop a Learning Consciousness in High School Classrooms." *Social Studies* 79, 5 (September-October 1988): 228-31. EJ 379 343.

Howe opens his brief essay on motivating students to learn by recounting his early experiences as a high school history teacher. He began confidently with carefully constructed lectures that summarized what he learned in his college courses. Despite this knowledge and considerable enthusiasm, the lectures fell flat. Students did not take notes, and they did not seem interested in what he had to say.

Howe's difficulties prompted him to recall that he first became interested in history through reading historical fiction, not dry texts. He began using a more biographical approach in his lectures and presented historical subjects as people who had struggled with concerns his students were familiar with. Before discussing Alexander the Great's historical accomplishments, for example, Howe detailed his formative relationships with his parents. Hence, students "saw that history was about people just like themselves, who dealt with all sorts of problems and sought the best solutions."

He also found that he could convince students that studying history was practical. Listening to National Public Radio and reading newspapers helped him to relate historical and contemporary events and prompted his students to think about how people have influenced history.

Creating an active learning environment, Howe concludes, requires attention to process as well as product. The goal is not so much to impart particular knowledge, but to create a learning consciousness that is fundamental to education and to life itself.

8 **Lake, Sara**. *Instructional Practices for Middle Grade Students: Developing Self-Directed Learners*. Sacramento, California: California League of Middle Schools, 1988. 20 pages. ED 304 232.

Lake's brief monograph begins by citing research emphasizing the importance of teaching students how to learn independently. They should be able to set goals, apply skills to meet those goals, and apply evaluation standards to those goals. Developing self-directed learners is particularly important in a rapidly changing society, says Lake: "Facts learned may become obsolete, but knowing 'how to learn' will not."

Middle grade students typically undergo several transitions that make self-directed learning challenging. They are undergoing the rigors of puberty, switching their social allegiances from parents to peers, and developing minds capable of abstract thought, including the introspective skills needed for evaluating moral questions.

Teachers can address these children's needs by meshing instruction to their developmental level. A variety of brief, often manipulative activities fits with middle grade students' rapid state of physical development, for example. Prompts such as interpretive questions may stimulate students to operate at higher cognitive levels and encourage their growing capacity for reflection. Asking students to assume more responsibilities will enhance their sense of confidence and validate their increasing need for independence. Forming learning teams may build the social skills of more reticent students and stimulate all pupils to work harder to avoid disappointing their peers.

Lake argues that self-directed learning requires innovative teaching styles. Instruction should frequently include questions and discussion, individualized attention, and peer tutoring both in pairs and in larger groups. Student projects, notes Lake, "put students in control of their own learning and emphasize skills of planning and time management," certainly skills integral to self-directed learning. Students will also be more motivated to learn if they are involved in classroom planning. Lake notes that this can include everything from asking them to choose their own term paper topics to inviting them to do curriculum planning.

9 **McPartland, James M., and Shi-Chang Wu.** *Instructional Practices in the Middle Grades: National Variations and Effects.* Baltimore, Maryland: Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, 1988. 29 pages. ED 301 321.

McPartland and Wu are concerned that middle grade students are not learning the skills needed to cope in a society with fewer external regulations on behavior. A more open society, they say, requires people competent in areas such as reading comprehension, problem-solving techniques, and critical thinking skills. Yet middle grade teachers are often well trained in neither their subject matter nor in interpretive thinking, and classroom activities often consist of a tedious "sequence of predetermined steps."

The authors use data from the 1985-86 National Assessment of Educational Progress study of science and math in grade 7 to detect classroom factors related to student mastery of higher order, interpretive skills.

The national report does not reveal simple solutions to the problem of teaching complex interpretive skills. Classroom science experiments and, to a lesser degree, the use of specialized science teachers are related to higher order skills in science. Likewise, specialized math teachers tend to be more effective than their less trained counterparts. In both science and math, however, such factors are dwarfed by environmental ones, such as student background and school demography.

The study, though far from conclusive, suggests to the they remark, "along with activities or lessons that will accommodate such expertise and style."

10 **Thomas, John W.; Robert G. Curley; and Amy Strage.** "Course-Related Impediments to Effective Study Practices." Paper presented at the annual meeting for the American Educational Research Association, Washington, D.C., April 1987. 49 pages. ED 293 810.

The authors begin their paper by arguing that calls for higher standards in schools tend to be simplistic. Ambitious solutions should not be applied until more is known about the variables that affect student performance. The authors' two-year study of more than twenty junior high, high school, and college social science courses is an attempt to evaluate these variables, particularly the relationship between course characteristics and autonomous learning activities.

Numerous statistical analyses, presented in both the text and in tables, illustrate the complex relationship between instructional techniques and effective learning. Among the more salient findings discussed is that increasing students' information load apparently does not prompt them to engage in a greater number of learning activities or to separate important from unimportant information. Students faced with more work, then, tend to stick to old study techniques, although the provision of learning supports may lead them to be more innovative and efficient. Likewise, competitive grading generally does not prompt students to study more effectively. Indeed, high school students tend to engage in less constructive mental processing when faced with competitive grading practices.

Junior high students faced with increasing demands for rote processing are likely to engage in more rote study activities, such as rereading, copying notes, and rehearsing. When asked to do more analytical work, however, junior high students generally eschew the abstract study activities necessary for such work. Indeed, requesting that students engage in more integrative or interpretive activities tends to decrease their self-regard. The authors wonder if junior high and high school students are so frequently unnerved by such demands because they are more often asked to repeat information than to analyze or understand it.

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